



A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars

By Andrew Hartman

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When Patrick Buchanan took the stage at the Republican National Convention in 1992 and proclaimed, “There is a religious war going on for the soul of our country,” his audience knew what he was talking about: the culture wars, which had raged throughout the previous decade and would continue until the century’s end, pitting conservative and religious Americans against their liberal, secular fellow citizens. It was an era marked by polarization and posturing fueled by deep-rooted anger and insecurity.

Buchanan’s fiery speech marked a high point in the culture wars, but as Andrew Hartman shows in this richly analytical history, their roots lay farther back, in the tumult of the 1960s—and their significance is much greater than generally assumed. Far more than a mere sideshow or shouting match, the culture wars, Hartman argues, were the very public face of America’s struggle over the unprecedented social changes of the period, as the cluster of social norms that had long governed American life began to give way to a new openness to different ideas, identities, and articulations of what it meant to be an American. The hot-button issues like abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, feminism, and homosexuality that dominated politics in the period were symptoms of the larger struggle, as conservative Americans slowly began to acknowledge—if initially through rejection—many fundamental transformations of American life.

As an ever-more partisan but also an ever-more diverse and accepting America continues to find its way in a changing world, *A War for the Soul of America* reminds us of how we got here, and what all the shouting has really been about.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A lively chronicle. . . . Mr. Hartman's book makes two major contributions. The first is his framing of the 'culture wars' debate from its earliest days. . . . His second major contribution is his conclusion that the culture wars are over."

(Wall Street Journal)

"As a guide to the late twentieth-century culture wars, Hartman is unrivaled. . . . Incisive portraits of individual players in the culture wars dramas. . . . Reading Hartman sometimes feels like debriefing with friends after a raucous night out, an experience punctuated by laughter, head-scratching, and moments of regret for the excesses involved."

(New Republic)

"A provocative review of a formative epoch."

(Booklist)

"A valuable addition to the growing body of literature historicizing the post-Sixties era. . . . Classic intellectual history. . . . Thoughtful and thought-provoking."

(Library Journal)

"An unparalleled guide . . . making sense of the polarized politics that have plagued the USA for the past four decades. . . . Hartman's central point is that the debates were deadly serious, asking fundamental questions about who we are as a nation, and about who we want to be. . . . In his efforts to provide an overview and explanation of the culture wars, Hartman is to date without peer."

*(Kevin M. Schultz *The Sixties*)*

"Hartman's text is nothing less than required reading on the culture wars, their history, and their impact on American public life."

*(L. Benjamin Rolsky *H-Net Reviews*)*

"The first book to tell the story of this war in all its diversity. . . . Hartman, to his credit, insists that the issues at stake in cultural politics are 'real and compelling.' . . . His affections clearly rest with the liberals, but he is generally nonpolemical in his accounts of the two sides."

(Christian Century)

"Andrew Hartman has worked with a deft hand and a keen mind to give us an absorbing account of the last half-century of culture wars in the United States. By digging far beneath the cross-fire style of political rhetoric that bombards us today, Hartman shows how the seismic changes in American society, most notably in the struggle to create a more equal and inclusive democracy, unleashed a fierce conservative attempt to hold on to a world that was escaping their grip."

*(Gary Nash, author of *History on Trial*)*

"Whatever happened to the culture wars? Americans don't argue the way they used to, at least not over hot-button cultural issues like same-sex marriage and abortion. Andrew Hartman has produced both a history and

a eulogy, providing a new and compelling explanation for the rise and fall of the culture wars. But don't celebrate too soon. On the ashes of the culture wars, we've built a bleak and acquisitive country dedicated to individual freedom over social democracy. Anyone who wants to take account of the culture wars--or to wrestle with their complicated legacy--will also have to grapple with this important book."
(Jonathan Zimmerman, author of *Whose America?*)

"*A War for the Soul of America* illuminates the most contentious issues of the last half of the twentieth century. In lively, elegant prose, Andrew Hartman explains how and why the consensus that appeared to permeate the nation following World War II frayed and fractured so dramatically in the 1960s. With keen insight and analysis, he shows that the Culture Wars were not marginal distractions from the main issues of the day. Rather, they were profound struggles over the very foundation of what it meant to be an American. In tracing the history of those conflicts over the last half of the twentieth century, Hartman provides a new understanding of the tensions and processes that transformed the nation."

(Elaine Tyler May, author of *America and the Pill*)

"Hartman's richly researched intellectual history makes a major contribution by taking late twentieth century conservative political culture seriously. *A War for the Soul of America* is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the fierceness with which so many Americans continue to defend themselves against feminism, immigration, gay rights and racial equality in the twenty-first century as well."

(Claire Bond Potter, The New School)

"The culture wars were about more than porn, rap lyrics, and *Piss Christ*, Andrew Hartman shows in *A War for the Soul of America*. They were fundamentally about divergent visions of national life. This is a lucid and powerful book that explains much about our own time."

(David Sehat, author of *The Jefferson Rule*)

"There is no shortage of great books about post-1960s American political culture. Andrew Hartman's history of the culture wars ranks among the best. Hartman manages to transcend the worldviews of his subjects, other than to confirm the existence of the culture wars as a distinct moment in American history. His is not the final word on that moment. It is, however, among the most reliable accounts thus far."

(*American Historical Review*)

About the Author

Andrew Hartman is associate professor of history at Illinois State University and the author of *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Hans Diaz:

The book *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* can give more knowledge and also the precise product information about everything you want. So why must we leave the best thing like a book *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*? Some of you have a different opinion about guide. But one aim which book can give many data for us. It is absolutely correct. Right now, try to closer together with your book. Knowledge or details that you take for that, it is possible to give for each other; you could share all of these. Book *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* has simple shape but you know: it has great and large function for you. You can look the enormous world by wide open

and read a guide. So it is very wonderful.

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